

Associated Press, April 29, 2009

US does about-face on Camp Lejeune's tap water

By RITA BEAMISH

Nearly 12 years ago, a federal report told Marines and their families that adults faced little or no increased cancer risk from drinking and bathing in chemical-tainted water at North Carolina's Camp Lejeune. That report — long challenged by skeptical veterans — no longer stands.

Federal health officials said Tuesday they were withdrawing their 1997 assessment of health effects from the water contamination because of omissions and scientific inaccuracy.

"We can no longer stand behind the accuracy of the information in that document, specifically in the drinking water public health evaluation," William Cibulas, director of health assessment for the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, said at a meeting in Atlanta. "We know too much now."

The agency, charged with protecting public health around toxic sites, said some parts of the document — dealing with lead, soil pesticides and fish contamination — remain accurate in characterizing the past environmental hazards.

But the water section, analyzing toxins that seeped into wells from a neighboring dry cleaner and from Camp Lejeune industrial activity, contained "troublesome" information, said Cibulas.

As many as 1 million people may have been exposed to water toxins over 30 years before the bad wells were closed in 1987, health officials now say. The Marines estimated the number at

500,000.

When former Marines took their stories last year to Congress, they were dubbed "poisoned patriots."

Some people have interpreted the 1997 report as, "No way, no how, would any person who drank contaminated water at Camp Lejeune be expected to suffer any adverse health effects, be they cancerous or non-cancerous," said Cibulas. "The science is just not that good for us to make that determination."

Problems in the document included omission of the cancer-causing chemical benzene, despite high levels found in a well in 1984, said Cibulas.

Additionally, the contaminating solvents the report focused on have been characterized in newer science as even more potent, he added. Levels of one solvent, called TCE, measured higher than in any known public water supply, an ATSDR scientist said.

Cibulas also noted the report underestimated the extent of the contamination in base housing areas. The mistake, due to inadequate information from the Marines, was reported by The Associated Press in a 2007 investigation of the toxic water.

The health agency did not make any new conclusions, but pulled its flawed document from the Internet to redo its analysis with new science. People who want the still valid parts of the report now have to contact the agency in Atlanta.

The health officials are continuing a separate study into whether fetuses might have been harmed by the water. Agency scientists are conducting elaborate water models to get to the bottom of the contamination.

Tuesday's unusual about-face came at a meeting of the health agency, part of the Health and

Human Services Department, with its community advisory panel that works on follow-up to Camp Lejeune's past water problems.

It comes at a sensitive time, after congressional investigators last month accused the agency of obscuring or overlooking potential health hazards at toxic sites. The agency's director, Howard Frumkin, assured Congress he was working to improve on any shortcomings.

The Camp Lejeune report ambiguously stated both that adults faced no increased cancer risk from the water, and that cancer was not likely but that more study was needed.

It said children's cancer risk was unknown, but it raised concerns about fetuses exposed to the water, citing studies elsewhere on leukemia and birth defects.

Rep. Brad Miller, D-N.C., said he hoped Tuesday's development signaled ***"that the leadership of ATSDR is now willing to acknowledge their past mistakes and to take measures to protect the public's health in the future."***

The reversal Tuesday was cold comfort for some former Marines.

Allen Menard believes his rare non-Hodgkin's lymphoma is linked to his time at Camp Lejeune in the early 1980s. "They knew about the benzene," he said. "Why didn't they tell us?"

According to the Navy's legal office, which handles claims, 1,500 former Camp Lejeune residents have filed claims for \$33.8 billion in damages. The military is waiting for conclusions from the study of fetal effects before deciding the claims.

On the Net:

Federal health information on the water contamination: <http://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/SITES/LEJEU>
[NE](#)